

# Enhancing Pastor-Board Relationships

Reprinted with permission from CHRISTIAN EDUCATION.

By Terry Powell  
COLUMBIA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

How would you describe your working relationship with the church's overseer board (deacons or elders)? Are you pleased with it? Why or why not?

What words best describe your personal relationship with the various individuals on the boards? What kind of relationship do board members have with one another? How much of your time and energies are spent in board-related work and relationships?

Such questions on pastor-board relationships are crucial. Taking inventory on this sphere of ministry is imperative because it may be Satan's primary target in a church: If he inject animosity, complacency, or superficiality into the bloodstream of the leadership, the problem flows through numerous arteries of the congregation until the whole body is infected.

What follows are basic insights to help you evaluate and enhance this realm of your ministry. The ideas are far from exhaustive, and space limitations don't permit a detailed exploration of each point. But perhaps these points will serve as a catalyst for your thoughts, and prompt you to probe the issue further.

## **1. Pastor-board relationships must be viewed through the lens of a Biblical philosophy of ministry.**

First, let's put the spotlight on the vocational pastor's role. According to Bruce Wilkinson, director of Walk Thru the Bible ministries, pastors must "structure the WHAT of ministry on the foundation of WHY the pastoral office exists." Put simply, what we do in relationship to the church boards should be determined by God's "purpose statement" for vocational ministers.

That purpose statement is most evidently couched in Ephesians 4:11-12. God gave pastors-teachers "for the *equipping of the saints* for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ."

Training others to function within the body, according to gifts and developing abilities, is an ongoing responsibility. The scope of that task is certainly not limited to board members. Yet, as Richard Halverson maintains, "The natural group with which to conduct such a ministry is the church board. Where else could a pastor more wisely begin to disciple?" (*LEADERSHIP*, Winter 1980). Joe Aldrich asserts, "A primary part of the pastor's job description is the building of men. His major job is to help others minister-not to do all the work of ministry himself . . . Even though the pastor is a shepherd who loves the entire body, a ministry to men must have a special place in his heart" (*Lifestyle Evangelism*, p. 177).

Now let's shift the focus to board members. Traditionally, they've made the management of local church ministries and business a priority. This ruling or administrative function is Biblical (1 Tim. 3:5, 5:17). However, in many churches the other aspects of their job description are de-emphasized: caring and shepherding roles (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28; 1 Tim.3:5); serving as examples of Christlike character (1 Pet. 5:3); teaching and exhorting the flock (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:9), refuting false teachings that creep into the church (Titus 1:9, 11); and praying for the sick (James 5:14-15).

These responsibilities blend naturally with the job description of a vocational pastor. He must help prepare board members for these roles, or they'll be neglected. Who else has the tools and training to do it?

*How* the pastor does this in relationship to board members is a question we must continually ask. Specific answers may validly differ among pastors, for Scripture offers lots of freedom in the how-to of applying such a principle. The next few points, though, offer food for thought in the realm of application.

## **2. Time with board members outside official meetings-is essential.**

Jesus set the pace for contemporary pastors. "He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him" (Mark 3:14). In *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Robert Coleman says, "Contrary to what one might expect, as the ministry of Christ lengthened into the second and third years He gave increasingly more time to the chosen disciples, not less. The time

which Jesus invested in these few disciples was so much more by comparison to that given to others that it can be regarded as a deliberate strategy. And even while Jesus was ministering to others, the disciples were always there with Him."

What forms can "witness" take?

One pastor and his wife, upon moving to a new church field, scheduled a meal in their home once a month with one or two deacon families until they had eaten with each deacon and his spouse. This provided a foundation for building relationships that remained solid through the years.

Another pastor emphasizes the benefit of visiting deacons "in their habitat." That means a tour of the office or plant where each works. Going to their turf demonstrates concern for the total person, particularly the unique pressures and needs each faces on the job.

When Senate chaplain Richard Halverson was a pastor, he scheduled regular breakfast or lunch appointments with board members. Because his purpose was relationship-building, he rarely discussed church business or took an agenda with him to these appointments. Halverson says, most laypersons assume that pastors have only a professional interest in them, and desire their company only when their service or their money is required for the work." Once, as Halverson enjoyed a meal with a lay leader from his church, he sensed a growing tension. Finally the man looked at his watch and said, "Dick, I've got a two o'clock appointment and must leave in ten minutes. What did you want?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wanted to be with you."

He retorted, "Come on, friend, you can level with me. What do you want?"

I repeated "Honestly, nothing. I just wanted to be with you."

I was silent for a moment. then he said, "Dick, this is the first time a preacher has wanted to be with me when he didn't want something from me." (Anecdote from *LEADERSHIP, Winter 1980*)

How can this "time with" concept flesh itself out in your particular position?

### **3. Communication among church leaders should be marked by openness and vulnerability.**

While establishing a church in Thessalonica, Paul and his associates shared "not only the gospel of God but also our own lives (1 Thess. 2:8) Paul and the elders from Ephesus weren't ashamed to express affection for one another: "He knelt down and prayed with them all. They began to weep aloud and embraced Paul and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they should see his face no more" (Acts 20:36-38).

If members of the pastoral staff and board cannot share their lives by revealing their innermost needs to one another for the purpose of prayer-and encouragement, can they expect others in the congregation to build supportive relationships?

One church board strives for this depth by reserving the first 20 minutes of every meeting for personal sharing and intercession for one another. Another church schedules a yearly staff-board retreat for relationship-building and personal renewal. No church business or ministry planning is slated for the weekend. In *LifeStyle Evangelism*, Joe Aldrich says, "While in the pastorate I met with at least five groups of men each week. I met one-on-one with a dentist friend, with two other board members, with a group of twenty or thirty businessmen, ..once with the entire board, and with the pastoral staff (seven men). Although the group dynamics were different, the purposes were similar. With mutual accountability we shared the Word, prayer, schedules, and relationships.

"Each year, at my request, the board of elders met in private sessions (without me) to evaluate my ministry, my marriage and family, and anything else they desired. This information, often painful, was shared in love and resulted in growth and encouragement. It also set a precedent, which was my purpose for seeking the evaluation in the first place. Recognizing the value of such an exercise, the board requested that this evaluation be extended to include each of them.

No pastor need copy the precise strategies of any other. But every' pastor should ask, "How can I deepen the lines of communication and accountability between board members and me?"

### **4. Equipping board members for service requires flexible, but intentionally planned strategies.**

Gib Martin, long-time pastor of Seattle's Trinity Church, fasts and prays one day each year for the specific purpose of

determining relevant projects for each board member. He keeps a notebook oh board members in which he lots down prayers for them, designs Bible study exercises suited to their needs, etc.

Many pastors take one or more board members along to conferences and seminars they attend. Others continually route books or tapes on various aspects of church ministry to their board I members. A few look for men with a I special burden for evangelism, and take I them along on visitation opportunities. Still others teach workshops on Bible study methods, classroom teaching methods, and so forth as a means of better preparing key men for ministries of their own.

Whatever form it takes, your investment in board members reaps dividends long after they leave their elected position. For you will have equipped them for an ongoing ministry, not just for the fulfillment of a slot in the church's organizational chart.

No "program" is as important as proper relationships between pastor and a board, and among board members. A healthy board produces a healthy body. As a pastor, what new thing can you begin doing to apply one or more of these points and enhance relationships with your board members?

## Resources for Pastor-Board Relationships

Aldrich, Joe **Lifestyle Evangelism** (Multnomah Press, 1981) \*Note Part 2, "Evangelism and the Local Church." The four chapters in this section put evangelism in the context of a philosophy of church ministry. Among other things, Aldrich discusses qualifications of leaders, and evaluation of board members.

Eims, Leroy **The Lost Art of Disciple Making** (Zondervan/NavPress, 1978) \*A comprehensive discussion of the discipling process. Not geared just to pastors, but applicable to pastoral training of board members.

Getz, Gene **Sharpening the Focus of the Church** (Moody, 1974) \*See chapter 9, "Leadership in the N.T. Church, Phase 2."

Getz, Gene **The Measure of a Man** (Regal, 1974) \*This paperback contains a full chapter on each of the leadership qualifications listed in 1 Timothy and Titus. A few churches have made it required reading for prospective board members. Other pastors use it in the context of a Bible study with board members.

Halverson, Richard "The Pastor and Board: Maintaining a Healthy Relationship" Article in the Winter, 1980 issue of LEADERSHIP, published by Christianity Today, Inc.

Perry, Lloyd **Getting The Church On Target** (Moody, 1977) \*Note chapters 3-6 on church management and leadership. Chapter 6, "Improving the Effectiveness of Boards and Committees," is most pertinent.

Johnson, L. Ted **The Serving Church** (Harvest Publications, available July 1983) \*A manual designed for members of your deacon/elder board.

Johnson, L. Ted and Edward A. Buchanan **The Teaching Church** (Harvest Publications, 1982) \*A Manual designed for shapers of educational ministries in the local church. See back page for more information.

Lindgren, Alvin J. and Norman Shawchuck **Let My People Go: Empowering Laity for Ministry** (Abingdon, 1980) \*Includes chapters on releasing human resources, leadership styles, congregational assessment, creating a supportive climate and other themes.

Terry Powell  
[terryp@ciu.edu](mailto:terryp@ciu.edu)  
January 6, 1999

---

Email this article to your friends.

Enter their email address in the box above, click "Send,"  
and we will take care of sending it to your friends.